

Good morning, Chairman Davis and members of the Committee on Government Reform. I am Mimi Dash, retired elementary teacher in Fairfax County Public Schools. I am also the former President of the Fairfax Education Association (FEA) and a former member of the Board of Directors of the Virginia Education Association (VEA) and the National Education Association (NEA). I currently serve on the Fairfax Education Board of Directors as the President of the Fairfax Education Association of Retired Educators.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to address the committee on the importance of employees having the ability to speak freely on issues of great importance within the workplace. I would like to give you some examples of areas of concern for educators that I have been aware of over my thirty years as a classroom teacher. First and most important is the area of possible child abuse. I will use the classroom teacher as the example, but there are other employees in the education system that might have the same concerns.

As a teacher, if I were to suspect the possibility of child abuse, I would report my suspicions to the principal. It would be up to principal to contact Child Protective Services. If, for some reason, the principal did not make the contact, what would my options be at that point? If I were to contact Child Protective Services directly, that could be considered insubordination. If I were to make the choice to adhere to the county policy, I could be risking the safety of the child. As an advocate for children, I would find it impossible to ignore the safety of the child. As a citizen it is my right, and in my opinion my duty, to protect the child. As a teacher I can't imagine it is any less my right or my duty, and yet, there appears to be a conflict.

I cannot stress the severity of this dilemma. Most teachers would be torn by this situation. I cannot know what choice others would make, but my choice would be clear. By advocating for the children for whom I dedicated my life, I could have risked my career.

I continue to work in the schools as a substitute and on special projects. I meet with educators through FEA at monthly meetings. Another issue I am hearing complaints about with limited or no action by the school system is the idea of “sick” schools. We are hearing examples of this in the news more frequently. We have many schools in which teachers are chronically ill. Some of these illnesses are quite serious. I serve on a committee hearing appeals for those denied short-term disability insurance. In one of those cases, an employee could have simply been allowed to transfer to a different location as recommended by her doctor. The school system refused and insisted she could return to work at the same location. Every time she returned to work, she became sick and had to go out on leave again, thus negating the terms of the insurance policy. Many educators have asked for help and get a “clean bill of health” for their schools although the illnesses continue. If teachers are getting sick, what about the long lasting effects on the less highly developed bodies of the children. Going public on this issue could adversely affect the teachers speaking out about the situation, but isn’t it not only their right but also their duty?

These are only two examples but there are probably many others. There could be bus safety issues, equipment issues, training issues and more. Please consider all the many safety issues that face our educators and our children.

Thank you for your time and attention to this issue.